

# Academic and Scientific Thinking on Global Mental Health in Future Healthcare Professionals: A New Challenge Aligned with Contemporary Needs

## Pensamiento académico y científico de la salud mental global en los futuros profesionales de la salud: un nuevo reto orientado a necesidades actuales

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### Abstract

Global mental health has emerged as a critical area of concern in the 21st century, driven by the increasing prevalence of mental health disorders, the impact of globalization, and the growing recognition of mental health as a cornerstone of overall well-being. The World Health Organization estimates that one in four people will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives, underscoring the urgency of addressing this issue. Despite this, mental health remains underprioritized in many healthcare systems, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where resources are scarce and stigma persists. Current needs in global mental health include the integration of mental health services into primary care, the development of culturally sensitive interventions, and the training of healthcare professionals equipped to address these challenges. Promoting academic and scientific thinking among future healthcare professionals is a strategic approach to addressing these needs. By fostering a deep understanding of the social, cultural, and biological determinants of mental health, as well as the latest evidence-based practices, future professionals can be better prepared to design and implement innovative solutions. This approach not only enhances their ability to respond to the diverse and complex demands of global mental health but also encourages a proactive mindset toward research and policy development. Ultimately, investing in the academic and scientific training of healthcare professionals can lead to more effective mental health interventions, reduced disparities, and improved outcomes for populations worldwide, aligning with the contemporary needs of a rapidly evolving global landscape.

**Keywords:** Global Health Strategies, Mental Health, Health Personnel, Public Health Professional Education, Academia.

### Resumen

La salud mental global ha surgido como un área de preocupación crítica en el siglo XXI, impulsada por la creciente prevalencia de trastornos mentales, el impacto de la globalización y el reconocimiento cada vez mayor de la salud mental como un pilar fundamental del bienestar general. La Organización Mundial de la Salud estima que una de cada cuatro personas se verá afectada por trastornos mentales o neurológicos en algún momento de su vida, lo que subraya la urgencia de abordar este problema. A pesar de ello, la salud mental sigue siendo una prioridad secundaria en muchos sistemas de salud, especialmente en países de ingresos bajos y medios, donde los recursos son escasos y el estigma persiste. Las necesidades actuales en salud mental global incluyen la integración de servicios de salud mental en la atención primaria, el desarrollo de intervenciones culturalmente sensibles y la formación de profesionales de la salud capacitados para enfrentar estos desafíos. Fomentar el pensamiento académico y científico entre los futuros profesionales de la salud es una estrategia clave para abordar estas necesidades. Al promover una comprensión profunda de los determinantes sociales, culturales y biológicos de la salud mental, así como de las prácticas basadas en evidencia más recientes, los futuros profesionales estarán mejor preparados para diseñar e implementar soluciones innovadoras. Este enfoque no solo mejora su capacidad para responder a las demandas diversas y complejas de la salud mental global, sino que también fomenta una mentalidad proactiva hacia la investigación y el desarrollo de políticas. En última instancia, invertir en la formación académica y científica de los profesionales de la salud puede conducir a intervenciones más efectivas en salud mental, reducir las disparidades y mejorar los resultados para las poblaciones en todo el mundo, alineándose con las necesidades contemporáneas de un panorama global en rápida evolución.

**Palabras clave:** Estrategias de Salud Globales, Salud Mental, Personal de Salud, Educación en Salud Pública Profesional, Academia.



## I. INTRODUCTION

Global mental health has gained unprecedented relevance in recent decades, establishing itself as an essential component of sustainable development and human well-being [1]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental disorders are among the leading causes of disability worldwide, with over 970 million people affected in 2019 [2]. This figure, which has risen significantly following the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, reflects the magnitude of a problem that transcends geographic, economic, and cultural boundaries [3]. Mental health not only influences the quality of life of individuals but also has profound implications for economic productivity, social cohesion, and political stability [4]. For instance, mental disorders are estimated to cost the global economy approximately \$1 trillion annually in lost productivity, underscoring the need to address this issue from an integrated and multisectoral perspective [5].

Furthermore, globalization has exacerbated mental health challenges by creating environments characterized by increased stress, inequality, and forced migration [6]. Vulnerable populations, such as refugees, individuals living in poverty, and ethnic minorities, face additional barriers to accessing adequate mental health services [7]. In this context, global mental health cannot be viewed solely as a medical issue but rather as an interdisciplinary phenomenon requiring innovative and collaborative solutions. The relevance of this approach lies in its ability to integrate biological, psychological, social, and cultural perspectives, enabling a more holistic understanding of the challenges and a more effective response to the needs of populations [7].

Academic and scientific thinking enables students to develop a deep understanding of the social, biological, and cultural determinants of mental health [8]. Through an interdisciplinary approach, future professionals can learn to integrate knowledge from fields such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and public health, allowing them to address mental health issues from a more comprehensive perspective [9]. Additionally, training in scientific research fosters a critical and evidence-based mindset, essential for identifying best practices and adapting them to specific contexts.

In this complex scenario, academic and scientific thinking emerge as fundamental tools for training healthcare professionals capable of addressing global mental health challenges. Higher education has the potential to transform how future professionals understand and respond to mental health issues, equipping them with the theoretical and practical skills necessary to design and implement effective solutions.

The aim of this manuscript is to analyze the current knowledge gap and relevance of global mental health and to discuss the role of developing academic and scientific thinking in future healthcare professionals as a strategy to contribute to addressing the demands of this critical issue.

## II. CURRENT SCENARIO OF GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is a fundamental component of global health and is intrinsically linked to other aspects of human well-being [10]. The WHO defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” [11]. This definition underscores the importance of addressing mental health as an integral part of efforts to improve global health.

Mental disorders not only affect the quality of life of individuals but also have profound implications for economic productivity, social cohesion, and political stability [2, 4]. For example, mental disorders are estimated to cost the global economy approximately \$1 trillion annually in lost productivity [5]. Furthermore, mental health is closely related to other global health issues, such as non-communicable diseases (NCDs) [2]. A study published found that individuals with mental disorders have a significantly higher risk of developing cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and other NCDs [12], highlighting the need for an integrated approach to address these issues.

Globalization has contributed to the complexity of mental health challenges by creating environments characterized by increased stress, inequality, and forced migration [6]. Vulnerable populations, such as refugees, individuals living in poverty, and ethnic minorities,

face additional barriers to accessing adequate mental health services [7]. It has been found that refugees have a prevalence of mental disorders five times higher than the general population, due to factors such as exposure to violence, loss of social networks, and uncertainty about the future [13].

The current challenges in global mental health have direct implications for sustainable human development, as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [14]. In particular, the following aspects are affected:

**-Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages (SDG 3):** Specific targets are included to reduce the burden of mental disorders and promote mental health as an essential component of well-being. However, progress in this area has been limited due to persistent social, political, economic, and cultural gaps in many countries [14, 15].

**-Impact on education (SDG 4):** Mental disorders significantly affect individuals' ability to access quality education. For example, children and adolescents with mental disorders are more likely to drop out of school and achieve poorer academic outcomes. This perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality, limiting opportunities for personal and professional development [14, 15].

**-Impact on gender equality (SDG 5):** Women and girls face unique mental health challenges due to factors such as gender-based violence, discrimination, and unpaid caregiving responsibilities. A review published ten years ago found that women in low- and middle-income countries have a significantly higher prevalence of depression and anxiety compared to men, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive approaches [16]. Although more than a decade has passed, these problems persist [17].

**-Impact on decent work and economic growth (SDG 8):** Mental disorders directly affect labor productivity and individuals' ability to participate fully in the economy. According to a WHO report [18], individuals with mental disorders have lower employment rates and higher levels of absenteeism, contributing to the aforementioned economic losses.

**-Impact on reducing inequalities (SDG 10):** Marginalized populations, such as those living in poverty, refugees, and ethnic minorities, face additional barriers to accessing adequate mental health services. This perpetuates existing inequalities and limits opportunities for sustainable development [14, 15].

Thus, the importance of addressing global mental health issues in a timely and academically rigorous manner is evident. These issues impact various sectors of society and affect the general population as a whole.

### III. CURRENT SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL GAPS AFFECTING GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH

Despite advances in the understanding and treatment of mental disorders, significant gaps persist, limiting equitable access to quality mental health services [19]. In the social sphere, the stigma associated with mental disorders remains a pervasive barrier. This stigma not only discourages individuals from seeking help but also perpetuates social exclusion and discrimination [4, 20, 21]. In many cultures, mental health issues are perceived as personal weaknesses or moral failures, complicating the implementation of effective interventions [22, 23]. Below, specific examples are provided to illustrate the magnitude of current challenges and the difficulties they pose in developing definitive solutions:

**Social gaps:** Social gaps in global mental health are primarily manifested through stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion [4]. The stigma associated with mental disorders is one of the most significant barriers to seeking and receiving care [20]. According to a previous statistic [24], 90% of individuals with mental disorders in low- and middle-income countries do not receive treatment, largely due to fear of social rejection [24].

Additionally, vulnerable populations, such as refugees, homeless individuals, and ethnic minorities, face additional challenges. For example, a WHO report [18] revealed that refugees have a prevalence of mental disorders five times higher than the general population, due to factors such as exposure to violence, loss of social networks, and uncertainty about the future [18]. These populations often lack access to adequate mental health services, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Stigma is also reflected in the lack of awareness and education about mental health [25]. In many communities, mental disorders are perceived as personal weaknesses or moral failures, hindering the implementation of effective interventions [25]. This underscores the need for public awareness campaigns and education to reduce stigma and promote a more empathetic understanding of mental health issues.

**Political gaps:** At the political level, mental health has historically been marginalized in public health agendas. Although some countries have made progress in creating specific policies and programs, many others lack adequate legal and financial frameworks to address this issue. According to the WHO Mental Health Atlas 2020 [27], only 51% of countries have an updated mental health policy or plan, and fewer than 20% have a dedicated budget for its implementation [27].

In low- and middle-income countries, spending on mental health represents less than 2% of the total health budget [28], resulting in a critical shortage of human and material resources. For example, in Africa, there is less than one psychiatrist per million inhabitants, compared to 60 psychiatrists per million in Europe [27]. This lack of investment translates into insufficient service coverage, with fewer than one-third of individuals in need of treatment receiving adequate care [27, 28].

Furthermore, mental health policies are often misaligned with the needs of local populations [28]. In many cases, interventions are based on Western models that may not be applicable or acceptable in other cultural contexts [28]. This highlights the need for more inclusive and locally adapted policies that prioritize community participation and equity in access to services.

**Economic gaps:** Economic inequalities are another key factor affecting global mental health. Populations living in poverty face higher risks of developing mental disorders due to factors such as food insecurity, homelessness, and exposure to violence [20, 23]. However, these same populations are less likely to access mental health services due to financial and geographic barriers.

According to Ridley et al [29], individuals living in poverty have a prevalence of mental disorders twice as high as the general population [29]. Additionally, mental disorders contribute to the perpetuation of poverty by limiting individuals' ability to work, study, and fully participate in society [29]. This creates a vicious cycle in which poverty and mental health problems reinforce each other.

The lack of investment in mental health also has significant economic consequences. According to a WHO report [18], mental disorders cost the global economy approximately \$1 trillion annually in lost productivity [18]. This figure underscores the need to increase investment in mental health, not only as a matter of human rights but also as a strategy to promote economic development.

**Cultural gaps:** Cultural differences represent another significant challenge in global mental health. Mental health interventions are often based on Western models, which may not be applicable or acceptable in other cultural contexts [30]. For example, the concept of "mental health" may not have a direct equivalent in some languages or cultures, complicating communication and the implementation of programs [30].

Previously has been found that cultural interpretations of mental disorders vary widely, influencing how individuals seek and receive care [31]. In some cultures, mental health issues are attributed to spiritual or supernatural causes, leading to a preference for traditional treatments over medical interventions [31].

Additionally, cultural norms can perpetuate stigma and discrimination. For instance, in many societies, men are socialized to avoid expressing emotions, which can delay help-seeking behavior and increase the risk of suicide [32]. This underscores the need for culturally sensitive approaches that respect local beliefs and practices while promoting evidence-based interventions [32].

Thus, the social, political, economic, and cultural gaps affecting global mental health are profound and multifaceted. These gaps not only limit access to quality mental health services but also perpetuate inequalities and the stigma associated with mental disorders. To address these challenges, an integrated and multisectoral approach is required, prioritizing investment in mental health, promoting inclusive and locally adapted policies, and fostering public awareness and education.

#### IV. ACADEMIC AND SCIENTIFIC THINKING IN HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS: A DIPLOMATIC SKILL WITH GLOBAL REACH

Academic and scientific thinking is regarded as a fundamental tool for training healthcare professionals capable of addressing challenges and bridging gaps in global mental health [8, 9]. This skill encompasses not only the acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge but also the development of a critical, evidence-based mindset oriented toward solving complex problems [8, 9]. Below, an exploration is provided of how this approach can contribute to overcoming social, political, economic, and cultural gaps in global mental health:

**A. Promotion of a holistic understanding of mental health determinants:** Academic and scientific thinking enables healthcare professionals to comprehend the multifaceted determinants of mental health, including biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors [33]. This holistic understanding is essential for designing interventions that address the root causes of mental disorders rather than merely treating symptoms [34].

For instance, a professional with robust academic training can identify how economic inequalities and limited access to education and employment contribute to the prevalence of mental disorders in vulnerable populations [33, 34]. Such a perspective facilitates the development of comprehensive strategies that integrate clinical care with community development programs, thereby promoting sustainable and equitable solutions [33, 34].

Jenkins R [1] emphasizes the importance of integrating multisectoral approaches in global mental health. It highlights that interventions combining medical care with social and economic support significantly reduce the burden of mental disorders.

**B. Advancement of transformative research and innovation:** Scientific thinking fosters research and innovation, which are critical for addressing gaps in global mental health. Healthcare professionals with scientific expertise can contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions tailored to the specific needs of diverse populations [35].

For example, research in telepsychiatry and digital technologies has shown promise in overcoming geographical barriers and improving access to mental health services in remote areas. A study published in the Journal of Medical Internet Research [36] found that digital interventions can be as effective as in-person therapies for treating disorders such as depression and anxiety, particularly in resource-limited settings [36].

Furthermore, scientific thinking enables professionals to critically evaluate existing interventions and propose evidence-based improvements. This is particularly relevant in low- and middle-income countries, where many interventions are based on Western models that may lack cultural appropriateness.

**C. Reduction of stigma and promotion of awareness:** Academic and scientific thinking can also contribute to the reduction of stigma associated with mental disorders by fostering a more empathetic and evidence-based understanding of these issues [37]. Healthcare professionals with strong academic training are better equipped to educate communities about the importance of mental health and the rights of affected individuals [37].

For example, evidence-based awareness campaigns can help demystify mental disorders and encourage a more inclusive attitude toward those who experience them. A systematic review found that educational interventions aimed at reducing stigma can significantly improve attitudes toward mental health and increase the willingness to seek help [38].

Furthermore, healthcare professionals can play a key role in advocating for public policies that prioritize mental health and combat discrimination [38]. This includes promoting laws that protect the rights of individuals with mental disorders and foster social inclusion.

**D. Strengthening international collaboration:** Academic and scientific thinking promotes international collaboration, an essential element for addressing global mental health challenges. Healthcare professionals with scientific expertise can participate in international research networks, share knowledge and best practices, and contribute to the development of evidence-based global policies [39, 40].

For example, collaboration between high-income and low-income countries can facilitate the transfer of knowledge and resources, thereby promoting a more equitable approach to global mental health. Semrau et al [41] highlights the importance of international partnerships in strengthening mental health systems in resource-limited countries [41].

Additionally, healthcare professionals can assume a diplomatic role by advocating for mental health in international forums, such as the United Nations and the WHO [18]. This includes promoting the inclusion of mental health in the SDGs and advocating for increased global funding for mental health initiatives.

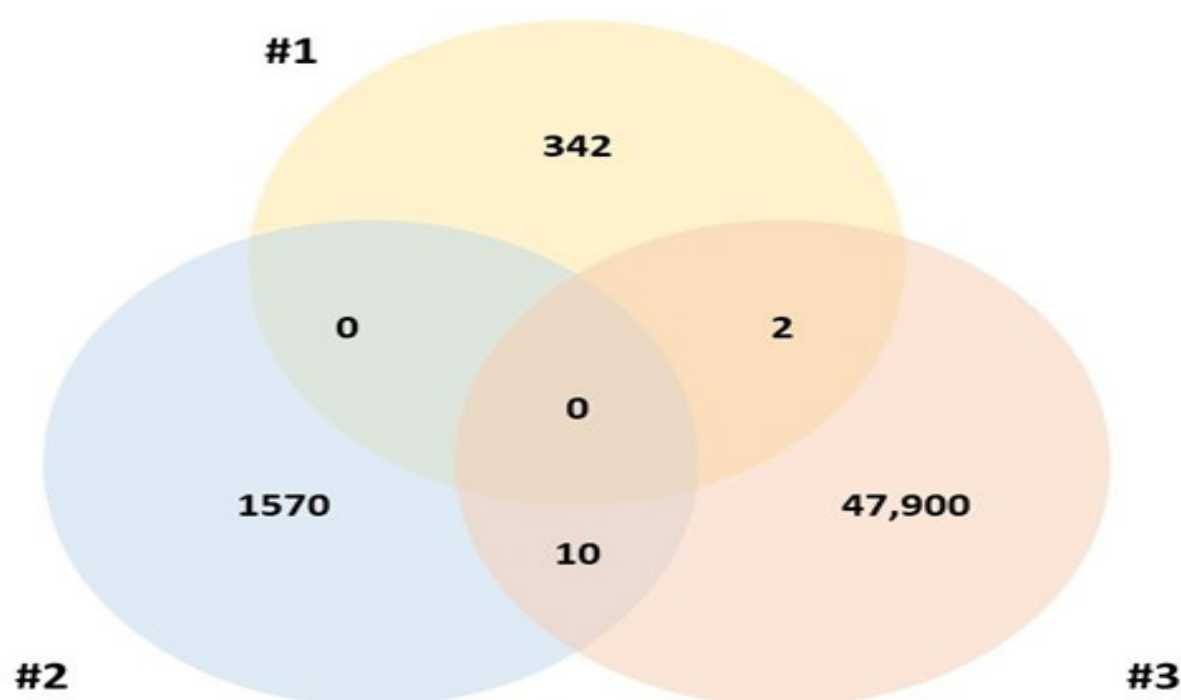
**E. Development of intercultural skills and cultural sensitivity:** Academic and scientific thinking also fosters the development of intercultural skills and cultural sensitivity, which are key elements for addressing cultural gaps in global mental health [42]. Healthcare professionals with strong academic training are better equipped to design interventions that respect local beliefs and practices while promoting evidence-based approaches [42].

For example, a professional with intercultural skills can collaborate with community leaders and traditional healers to integrate culturally appropriate methods into mental health programs [42]. This not only enhances the acceptability of interventions but also strengthens trust between healthcare professionals and local communities.

Montenegro et al [43] underscores the importance of intercultural collaboration in global mental health, noting that culturally sensitive interventions have a greater impact on reducing the burden of mental disorders.

This analysis demonstrates that academic and scientific thinking among healthcare professionals represents a diplomatic skill with global reach, capable of significantly contributing to the resolution of challenges and gaps in global mental health. By fostering a holistic understanding of mental health determinants, promoting research and innovation, reducing stigma, strengthening international collaboration, and developing intercultural skills, healthcare professionals can play a pivotal role in advancing mental health as an essential component of human well-being and sustainable development.

Current gaps in scientific evidence present a valuable opportunity to explore topics with potential for local, regional, national, and international impact (Figure 1) [44, 45, 46]. The strengthening of specialized human talent, infrastructure, and investment represents a potentially complex but highly relevant need in the short and medium term [47, 48]. Global mental health is a critical topic in the field, serving as the foundation for support and collaboration with international institutions and organizations. Such partnerships can facilitate the conduct of large-scale research studies and fieldwork with tangible societal impact. The inclusion of students in these processes offers an opportunity to develop high-level skills necessary to address intergenerational challenges requiring urgent resolution [49, 50, 51].



**Figure 1.** Current gaps in the availability of scientific evidence on academic and scientific thinking, global mental health, and healthcare professionals are highlighted. A semi-structured search was conducted in the PubMed database on January 20, 2025. The search strategies applied were as follows: #1 (“Academic Thinking”) OR (“Scientific Thinking”); #2 (“Global Mental Health”[Title/Abstract]); and #3 (“Healthcare Professionals”[Title/Abstract]). The combination of the searches and the results obtained are presented.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Global mental health represents an urgent and complex challenge that necessitates a coordinated and multisectoral response. The persistent social, political, economic, and cultural gaps in this field highlight the need for innovative approaches tailored to local realities. Academic and scientific thinking hold the potential to transform how future healthcare professionals address these challenges, equipping them with the tools required to design and implement effective and sustainable solutions. Through investment in academic and scientific training, progress can be made toward a future in which mental health is universally recognized as an essential component of human well-being and sustainable development.

## CRedit AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

**Mónica Acuña-Rodríguez:** conceptualization, research, methodology, writing-original draft, writing-revision and editing. **Ornella Fiorillo-Moreno:** conceptualization, research, methodology, writing-original draft, writing-revision and editing. **María Paz Bolaño-Romero:** conceptualization, research, methodology, writing-original draft, writing-revision and editing. **Wendy Cují-Galarza:** research, methodology, data analysis, writing-original draft, writing-revision and editing.

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